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Strengthening Community-Centered Responses to Violent Extremism

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Violent extremism has cost sixteen African nations an average of USD\$97 billion¹⁴ per year since 2007. A steady rise in violent extremism and terrorism, with major attacks in 2020 in Burkina Faso,¹⁵ Kenya,¹⁶ Mozambique,¹⁷ and others, is placing increasing pressure on U.S.-Africa relations in three key ways, by creating: 1) a direct risk to U.S. interests in Africa; 2) reputational threats resulting from anti-U.S. propaganda, and; 3) a threat to security relationships like the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

According to the Global Terrorism Index,¹⁸ 10 of the 20 countries most impacted by terrorism are in Africa. Since that report’s latest publication, the Islamic State (ISIS) has resurged in northern Mozambique and across the Sahel. New violent extremist groups are emerging, and existing groups being emboldened by the COVID-19 pandemic and African governments’ responses to it. Terrorism across Africa also undermines GDP growth and economic performance, diverts scarce financial resources, disrupts frontier markets, and impedes state-building.

While security-based responses to terrorism can be effective in the short term, they rarely have a lasting impact. They can generate resentment, undermine civil liberties, and fail to address the underlying issues that drive people—youth in particular—toward radicalization and violent extremism. The U.S. has dedicated increased funding to terrorism prevention efforts in Africa over the past few years, a testament to their effectiveness, both practically and financially.

The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) has pioneered a new preventative approach to violent extremism in Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, and Eastern Europe (GCERF is currently working in Bangladesh, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia, Tunisia, and the Western Balkans. It will soon be working in Burkina Faso, Mozambique, and Niger). It supports 100 community-led initiatives to address the drivers of radicalization where the risk is highest. Its unique approach focuses on co-creation with civil society organizations and capacity-building for local NGOs. The United States is one of GCERF’s largest donors (the U.S. co-founded GCERF with Switzerland, where it is currently headquartered), and through a specific earmark in the Global Fragility Act¹⁹ that funding will increase. As the U.S. continues to adapt its strategy following a monumental presidential election, GCERF remains a focal point for best practices and advice regarding violent extremism in Africa.

GCERF has demonstrated the return on investment for the prevention toolkit and community-centered responses to violent extremism. It is in the U.S. national interest to continue to address the drivers of the transnational threat of terrorism in the communities where it emerges, to support community-centered initiatives that leverage the impact of security approaches, and ultimately to support peace and prosperity in Africa.